

# Central Kuskokwim Moose Planning News

Issue 1, July 2003

## Moose Planning Committee Needs Your Input!

The Central Kuskokwim Moose Management Planning Committee has developed some preliminary ideas for improving moose management in Units 19A and B and would like to know what you think. This newsletter outlines some of the ideas of the Planning Committee and includes a public comment form that highlights some of the key issues they need



*Cow and calf moose survival must be improved if the moose population is to grow.*

### Special points of interest:

- *Overview of moose population and harvest information.*
- *Moose Planning Committee's preliminary ideas for changing the moose hunting regulations.*
- *Differing views on wolf predation control.*

**Please take a few moments to read the newsletter and help the planning effort by sharing your thoughts with the Planning Committee!**



Photo by Don Young, ADF&G

## How the Planning Effort Got Started

Many people hunt moose in Units 19A/B (Figure 1, page 2). Residents of local villages from Lower Kalskag to Lime Village depend on moose for subsistence. Many people from villages in the Yukon – Kuskokwim Delta and the City of Bethel come upriver to subsistence hunt for moose in Units 19A/B. The area is fairly accessible from Anchorage and Alaska residents and non-residents fly in to hunt. Several different guides

and transporters operate in Unit 19.

For several years the Central Kuskokwim Fish and Game Advisory Committee (CKAC) has expressed concern to the Alaska Board of Game (Board) about declining moose numbers in Units 19A/B. The committee has submitted several regulation proposals and recommended wolf predation control to boost moose numbers in the area. In March 2002 the

Board considered a wide array of moose proposals for the area from the CKAC and other users. The Board adopted a compromise that closed the main river corridors to non-resident hunters and allowed the use of snowmachines to take wolves in Unit 19, provided that the animals are not shot from a moving snowmachine. The river corridor clo-

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sure was designed to benefit subsistence hunters who travel mainly by boat and hunt along the river and to allow non-residents to continue to have the opportunity to hunt in the uplands, away from the main subsistence use areas.

These actions were viewed as partial solutions. The Board and others concerned with moose in the area urged the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) to initiate a planning process to involve all users and thoroughly address moose management issues in Units 19A/B.

The ADF&G launched the planning effort with the Aniak Regional Moose Summit in October 2002. More than 75 people attended the Summit to learn more about the moose populations in the Kuskokwim and Lower Yukon region and to voice their concerns and ideas. Participants in the summit reviewed a moose planning proposal prepared by ADF&G and supported establishing a planning committee to develop a Central Kuskokwim moose management plan.

## Central Kuskokwim Moose Planning Committee is Established

Following the Aniak Moose Summit, ADF&G accepted nominations for participants in the Planning Committee from advisory committees and other interest groups. The Central Kuskokwim Moose Planning Committee (CKMC or Planning Committee) is primarily composed of Fish and Game Advisory Committee (AC) members. All the members of the Central Kuskokwim AC that expressed an interest in participating were included in the Planning Committee. The CKMC also includes representatives from the Lower Kuskokwim, Anchorage and Matanuska Valley ACs, guides, transporters, Native organizations and environmental groups. Members of the CKMC and where they live are listed to the right. The Board of Game's liaison to the committee is Ted Spraker from Soldotna. In addition, George Siavelis, a guide from Aniak and Dario Notti with the Association of Village Council Presidents in Bethel, have participated in almost every planning committee meeting. ADF&G staff working to support the Planning Committee include Toby Boudreau, McGrath Area Biologist, Roy Nowlin, Management Coordinator and Randy Rogers, Wildlife Planner. Jim Pagel with Fish and Wildlife Protection and Jeff Denton, Wildlife Biologist with the Bureau of Land Management have also attended planning meetings.

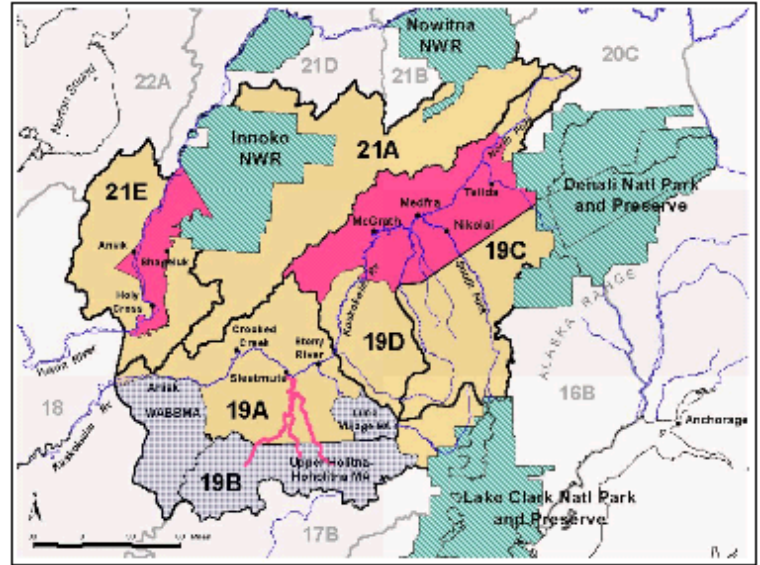


Figure 1. Game Management Units 19 A/B and surrounding area.

### Members of the Central Kuskokwim Moose Planning Committee are:

- **Harry Allain**, Aniak, CKAC
- **Joe Bobby**, Lime Village, CKAC
- **Karen Deatherage**, Anchorage, environmentalists
- **Jim Harrower**, Anchorage, Anchorage AC
- **Steve Hill**, Aniak, big game transporters
- **Oscar Larson**, Kwethluk, Lower Kuskokwim AC
- **Mark Matter**, Aniak, CKAC
- **Leo Morgan**, Aniak, local subsistence hunters
- **Patrick O'Connor**, Palmer, Matanuska Valley AC
- **Greg Roczicka**, Bethel, lower Kuskokwim subsistence hunters
- **Evan Savage**, Lower Kalskag, CKAC
- **Gail Vanderpool**, Red Devil, CKAC
- **Kelly Vrem**, Chugiak, big game guides
- **Thomas Willis** (and alternate Charlie Gusty), Stony River, CKAC



## Committee Members Deserve Credit For Their Hard Work to Address Many Difficult Issues

This winter, the CKMC held meetings in Aniak in February, March and April. Developing a moose management plan from the very beginning is hard work. Each meeting has been two days long with another day for travel time. Long hours are spent learning about moose population and harvest data, reviewing the knowledge of users, becoming familiar with state regulatory procedures and options and developing and editing draft language for the plan.

### Challenges the Committee Faces

There are likely not enough moose available for harvest in the Central Kuskokwim region to satisfy the needs of all hunters. Most people feel that the moose population has declined in recent years and predation on moose has increased. With fewer moose available, local subsistence users want to know when the state subsistence priority goes into effect. Subsistence hunters from the Lower Kuskokwim region (Unit 18) use moose in Units 19A/B and want to maintain their hunting opportunities. The Lower Kuskokwim AC has recommended a moratorium on moose hunting for the Kuskokwim drainage in Unit 18 and residents of Unit 19A are concerned about a possible increase in hunting pressure in their area from downriver residents. Resident hunters from other parts of the state and non-residents come to hunt in the Kuskokwim and would like to continue to do so. Guides and transporters operate primarily in the uplands of Unit 19B and would like to maintain their ability to make a livelihood. Environmentalists

are concerned that wolves and bears get blamed for declines in moose populations and not enough attention is given to managing harvest and habitat. As you can see, many different viewpoints are represented on the committee and it is not always easy to reach agreement. The committee's challenge is to work together to achieve

consensus on recommendations that, in the long run, will maintain and increase opportunities for diverse uses of the Central Kuskokwim moose resource. If consensus cannot be reached on all issues, then differing opinions will be presented to the Board of Game.

***See the insert in the Public Comment Response Form for an overview of the proposed goals for Central Kuskokwim Moose Management Plan.***

## Moose Population Status Update

A moose population estimate conducted in March 1998 indicated a density of 1.25 moose/sq. mi. in the Holitna and Hoholtna drainages (Figure 2). A March 2001 population estimate in a broad area around the Aniak River indicated a density

of 0.7 moose/sq. mi. For comparison, in 2001 the density of moose in a 5,200 sq. mi. area in Unit 19 D-East near McGrath was estimated to be 0.43 moose/sq. mi.

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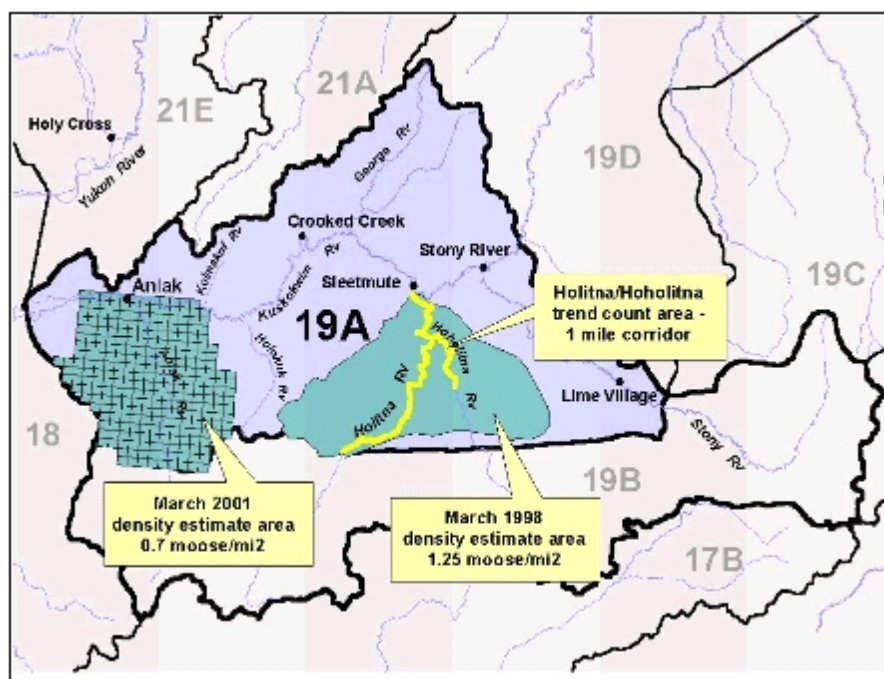


Figure 2. Moose Population Survey Areas in Units 19A/B

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The greatest biological concern about the moose population in Units 19A/B is based on the low calf:cow and bull:cow ratios. A November 2001 trend count conducted in a relatively small area along the Holitna/Hoholitna Rivers indicated only 8 calves per 100 cows and 6 bulls per 100 cows. Survey conditions or other factors may have influenced these numbers but the general trend is alarming. For comparison, in the 2001 survey in Unit 19D-East, there was estimated to be 15-43 calves per 100 cows, at least twice as many calves per 100 cows as in the Holitna River area.

This winter ADF&G's top priority was to conduct an additional moose survey in the Central Kuskokwim drainage. However, the snow cover was never sufficient to get a quality survey completed. Minimal late winter surveys to estimate calf survival were conducted on April 8 and 9 after a late winter snowfall but survey conditions were still not ideal. The resulting estimate was 7.6% calves in the Holitna/Hoholitna drainage and 8.9% in the Aniak drainage. These numbers support the belief that calf survival in the moose population is very low and a continuing decline in moose numbers is likely occurring. In or-

der to maintain the moose population late winter calf survival should be at least 10%. 15% calf survival or more is needed to promote population growth. Efforts to obtain additional moose population data will be renewed this coming fall.



Drawing by Michael Williams

## Planning Committee Views on the Moose Population

At the first meeting in February Planning Committee members agreed to a joint statement on the status of the moose population in Units 19A/B. At the April meeting the CKMC added "available scientific information" to this statement. Since that time the committee's environmental representative, Karen Deatherage has withdrawn her support for the statement due to her belief that scientific data does not indicate the moose population is low (For further detail see Karen's dissenting view on wolf predation control on page 7). The view of the majority of CKMC members follows.

**Based upon traditional ecological knowledge and the knowledge of all users, and available scientific information, the Planning Committee agrees to the following:**



Cathie Harms, ADF&G, facilitates the discussion at the Aniak Moose Summit, October 2002.

***"There is a major concern that the moose population in Unit 19A/B will not meet the needs of local subsistence users and other consumptive users. Local observations and available scientific data indicate that the moose population has substantially declined and in some areas is very low and will continue to jeopardize subsistence and other uses. The group agreed that additional state surveys would enhance local knowledge and help when recommendations are brought to the public for further review."***

## Hunter Numbers and Moose Harvest Have Declined

Failure to report harvest is a chronic problem in many areas of rural Alaska. Harvest reporting is thought to be better among urban residents and non-residents, perhaps because they are more accustomed to dealing with regulations and may be more likely to encounter Fish and Wildlife Protection officers when they travel by aircraft. Because harvest report data is not reliable in the Central Kuskokwim area, biologists and the Planning Committee must estimate the actual subsistence harvest. This makes it more difficult to define how many moose are

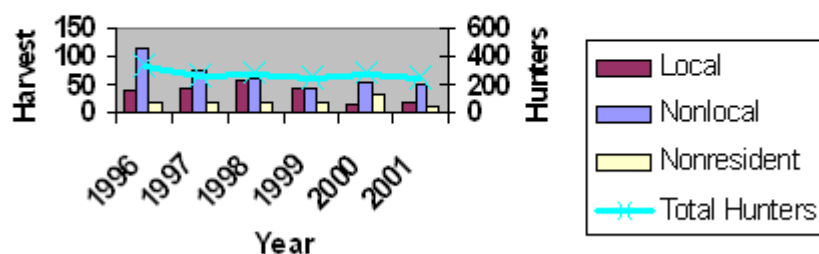
needed to provide for subsistence and how many are available for other uses. The Planning Committee has recognized the need to improve harvest reporting (see Goal #6, Strategy 6.3). Actual harvest is estimated to be approximately 33% greater than reported harvest.

Between 1994-95 and 2001-02 the reported number of hunters in Unit 19A declined from 364 to 293 (20%) and the reported number of moose harvested declined from 168 to 95 (43%). During the same period the reported number of moose harvested by residents of Units 19A/B declined

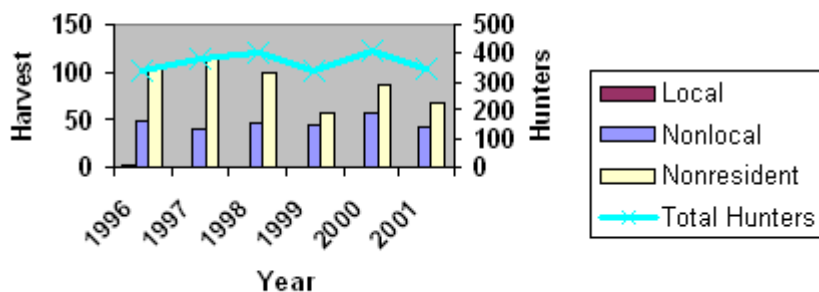
from 56 to 22 (61%). The number of moose reported harvested by Alaska residents who live outside of Units 19A/B declined from 82 to 53 (35%).

In Unit 19B the number of moose reported being harvested has declined from 163 to 112 (31%) between the 1994-95 season and 2001-02. Very few residents of Units 19A/B report having hunted in Unit 19B. During this period harvest of moose in Unit 19B by Alaska residents who live outside of Units 19A/B declined from 71 moose to 42 (41%). Non-resident harvest has also declined.

**Unit 19A Reported Moose Harvest by Residency and Total Hunters, 1996-2001**



**Unit 19B Reported Moose Harvest by Residency and Total Hunters, 1996-2001**



## Planning Committee Considers Wolf Control

As shown by past proposals submitted to the Board of Game by the Central Kuskokwim Advisory Committee, many local people who depend on moose as a subsistence resource support wolf control to increase the moose population. Several people advocated wolf control in the Aniak Regional Moose Summit and the Planning Committee meetings that have been held thus far. People have also noted the importance of predators as part of the ecosystem and the need to be cautious about possible over-harvest of bears and wolves. Some have expressed opposition to wolf predation control, except possibly in the most dire circumstances.

In their April meeting Planning Committee members and agency staff began to discuss the circumstances under which wolf control might be applied. The committee discussed questions such as:

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- Should there be a pre-requisite to conduct detailed scientific studies that might take several years and be very expensive?
- How much weight should be given to the knowledge of local residents and other hunters that have observed the decline in moose numbers and increase in the wolf predation?
- How much weight should be given to the concerns of people who live outside the area and may never visit but have philosophical concerns about manipulating wildlife through wolf control?
- If wolf control were to be conducted, should it be conducted by the public or by ADF&G staff?
- What areas should be prioritized for wolf control?
- What objectives should be set for increases in the moose population to define when predation control efforts would be discontinued?



Newborn moose calves are vulnerable to predation.

## Preliminary Ideas of the Planning Committee For Changing Moose Hunting Regulations

Reduced harvest is needed to promote growth in the moose population. Harvest of cow moose, whether legal or not, has the greatest impact on reducing productivity of the moose population. The following are the Planning Committee's preliminary ideas for revising moose hunting regulations. The proposed changes would all be applied together. ***Please review these ideas and use the enclosed Public Comment Response Form to let us know what you think.***

### Proposed Moose Hunting Seasons in Units 19A/B:

- Fall season, residents and non-residents Sept 1-20 (no change for 19A; reduced 5 days in Unit 19B from the current Sept. 1-25 season)
- No winter seasons

### Proposed Resident Harvest Ticket and Registration Permit Requirements for Units 19A/B: Resident hunters could choose from two options for the fall hunt.

1. Registration permit for any bull with permits only available in Unit 19 communities. Limit of 2 permits per household. This hunt would be oriented towards local subsistence users and would help to improve harvest reporting. Making the fall season dates in 19B consistent with 19A, would make it possible to use only one registration permit for both units.
2. General harvest ticket with antler restrictions requiring a spike/fork or 50" bull or 4 brow tines. The general harvest ticket hunt would be available for those who do not want to stop in a Unit 19A community to pick up a registration permit. The hunt would be oriented more towards fly-in hunters from the railbelt area who are more accustomed to spike/fork or 50" hunting regulations.

### Proposed Unit 19A Resident Tier II Hunt in the Lime Village Management Area: change the existing Tier II hunt from any moose to bulls only.

### Proposed Non-resident Registration Hunt for Unit 19A : Establish a registration hunt for bulls that are 50" or greater or 4 brow tines. Require prompt reporting and establish a moose harvest quota of 15 (exact harvest quota to be determined) to limit the non-resident harvest in Unit 19A.

- Maintain the newly established (March 2002) non-resident closed area in the river corridors. Add the Stony River up to Stink Creek to the non-resident closed area.

### Unit 19B Non-resident Hunt: No new permits proposed, season reduced by 5 days as noted above.

## Planning Committee Views on Wolf Predation Control

It is relatively easy to make general statements in favor or against wolf control. It becomes much more difficult to develop recommendations for a predator management program that can be biologically effective, affordable and acceptable to a broad range of people interested in wildlife management. Following their discussion of the many aspects of wolf control, the Planning Committee sought to achieve consensus on a statement in support of a wolf predation control program.



Photo by Bob Stephenson, ADF&G

**All members of the Planning Committee present at the April meeting except one, supported the following statement:**

“The Central Kuskokwim Moose Management Planning Committee recommends that a wolf control implementation plan be prepared and approved for Units 19 A/B. The first priority for predation control should be the river corridors that are currently closed to non-resident hunting. Moose in that area are an essential subsistence resource for local hunters.

The plan should initially be conducted by Department personnel using the most effective means available and should be implemented as soon as possible. Once the moose population has begun to recover, the focus should shift to public efforts to regulate the wolf population.

The Board of Game has reduced harvest opportunities and the committee recommends further reductions in harvest. The committee further recognizes that bear predation should also be reduced, and is developing recommendations to do so. However, in the absence of lethal aerial wolf control, any efforts to reverse the decline in the moose population will be futile.”

**All members of the Planning Committee agree that wolves are an important part of the ecosystem. No one has advocated eliminating all wolves from the Central Kuskokwim River Valley.**

**An alternative viewpoint:** The environmental representative on the Planning Committee, Karen Deatherage, provided the following statement to explain her disagreement with other committee members on recommending wolf control in Units 19A/B at this point in the planning process.

“I do not agree with the CKMC recommendation that a wolf control plan should be prepared and implemented for Units 19A/B. While I support the use of moose resources by local subsistence users, I believe a lethal wolf control plan in this area would be premature, and entirely inappropriate.

Limited scientific data for Units A/B show that moose populations are not low. Further, no real data exists for wolf populations; current estimates are based on anecdotal information.

I support the less controversial recommendations already in the plan, which include eliminating winter harvests to protect cows, creating ways to share meat from non-local hunters with villages, enhancing habitat along important river corridors through controlled burns or mowing, and when necessary, reducing non-resident harvests to increase moose available for local subsistence, among others. Unlike lethal predator control, these recommendations would provide long-term, community driven solutions without grossly manipulating important ecological systems that both rural residents and wildlife depend upon.

Lethal predator control should only be considered when other less controversial means have been attempted to restore moose populations, and only in cases where moose numbers are more seriously depressed; otherwise, a proliferation of plans will occur all over the state that are simply not achievable. If a lethal predator control plan is implemented for 19A/B, I do agree with the CKMC it should be conducted by ADF&G personnel using the most effective means available.



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***The Central Kuskokwim Moose Management Planning Committee Needs Your Input!  
Please review this newsletter and send in the enclosed Public Comment Response Form  
by July 20, 2003. All comments will be considered, no matter when they are received.***

This newsletter and other information are also available at the following website:  
<http://www.state.ak.us/local/akpages/FISH.GAME/wildlife/geninfo/planning/plan.htm>

## **Upcoming Opportunities to Help Develop the Plan**

The planning schedule has been designed so that the proposed plan and any related regulatory proposals can be submitted to the Board for consideration during their spring 2004 meeting. The Planning Committee is scheduled to meet again on July 22-24 to review the public comments from this newsletter and continue work on the plan. This fall, the Committee will meet again and make recommendations for a draft plan that will be presented to the Central Kus-



ADF&G file photo by Ken Whitten

kokwim Advisory Committee, other interested fish and game advisory committees, the Western Interior Subsistence Council and the interested public. Additional public comment will be taken and public meetings will

be held to review the draft plan. Following this review the Planning Committee will finalize its recommendations and work with interested advisory committees and the Western Interior Subsistence Council to submit any regulatory proposals necessary to implement the plan. Further public review and comment will occur through the Board of Game process. The plan and any proposals necessary to achieve consistency between state and federal regulations will be submitted to the Federal Subsistence Board and will again be available for public comment.